

AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE
NEWARK JUSTICE PROGRAM
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VIGIL AGAINST DEATH

On January 10, 1977, the New Jersey Senate narrowly passed the death penalty bill, S.639, by a vote of 21-14. Since 21 votes were needed for approval the margin was minimal. S.639 then went to the Assembly where it was passed on January 31, 1977. The bill now goes to the Governor. Gov. Byrne has been vacillating in his position. The Governor announced that he might sign the death penalty bill even if the Legislature did not pass the Penal Code. He has apparently backed down from that position and has returned to the position of waiting for the Penal Code Bill to be passed. If this is truly his position, we have roughly until May to try to influence the Governor. Political considerations are obviously part of Gov. Byrne's decision on the bill and the gubernatorial primary of June 7 will play a part in the Governor's actions.

The Newark Justice Program has engaged in many activities opposing capital punishment in N.J. and the rest of the nation. One such activity was a very successful prayer vigil against the death penalty held in February. This prayer vigil took place at the Shiloh Baptist Church of Trenton, Rev. Howard Woodson pastor. Not only was it an effective protest action itself, but it was a stimulus for other actions against capital punishment.

The prayer vigil is a means of expressing opposition to capital punishment and a tool for educating the public to the reasons why there should be no death penalty. It is an appeal to the morality of a state and its Governor. The Newark Justice Program believes that the most appropriate vehicles for moralistic appeal are the voices, prayers and pulpits of religious leaders, their congregations and friends. The purpose of a prayer vigil is to alert the Governor and the public to the fact that the restoration of capital punishment is opposed by the religious community, and that the campaign against capital punishment in New Jersey is alive and kicking.

Even though the vigil in Trenton was successful, it cannot be our final action against the restoration of capital punishment. To convince the Governor not to sign S.639, and help him understand that KILLING IS WRONG, either by the state or by an individual, the efforts of New Jersey citizens must be consistent and on-going. Therefore, the AFSC Newark Justice Program has scheduled another prayer vigil to be held on April 16, 1977.

The prayer vigil will consist of ministers throughout the state, their congregations and friends, coming together to support the sanctity of human life. There will be speakers, discussions, testifying, and most importantly, prayer. Among the things that the congregations will pray for are:

1. that the Governor and the people of New Jersey understand that the death penalty does not deter crime;
2. that people will understand that our system of justice is not perfect--many innocent people have been executed;
3. that the Governor realizes that death is irrevocable--once you take a life, you can't give it back;
4. that the Governor realizes the value of human life and will not sign a bill advocating and legalizing its destruction.

This prayer vigil will take place on April 16, from 10:00 am to 12:00 noon at the Bethany Baptist Church, 275 West Market Street, Newark, New Jersey. Rev. James E. Scott is the pastor.

For further information, please contact Wray Bailey, director of the AFSC Newark Justice Program, 526 Central Avenue, Newark, N. J. 07107 (201) 643-3079.